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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000094

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STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [AEMR](#) [EAID](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: TFX001: GOVERNMENT/LTTE RELIEF COORDINATION
REPORTEDLY GOOD, DESPITE BAD PRESS

REF: COLOMBO 0017 (NOTAL)

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Coordination between Government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) relief efforts on the ground, especially in the east, remains adequate, according to UN and foreign diplomatic sources, despite recent allegations and counter-allegations in the local press of obstructionism and/or mismanagement. Reports of uneven aid distribution seem more likely to be attributable to Government inefficiency and logistical constraints, or to deliberate misinformation, than to a calculated effort to target relief to a particular community. Tamil radio broadcasts on January 11 reported the LTTE had no objection to U.S. military participation in relief work in Sri Lanka. The Embassy has been unable to verify speculation in the local press that the December 26 tsunami killed Tiger leader Prabhakaran. End summary.

MUDSLINGING, BICKERING FOLLOWS
POST-TSUNAMI GOODWILL

2. (U) The devastation of the December 26 tsunami evoked rare expressions of camaraderie and communal harmony in a country torn by 21 years of ethnic insurgency. In a public address on December 28 Chandrika Kumaratunga underscored the need for all ethnic groups to work together, saying, "We must all stand together. It is not possible for any one community alone to rebuild this country." Not to be outdone, Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) chief Prabhakaran sounded a similarly high-minded note when he was quoted on the LTTE Peace Secretariat website the following day offering condolences to "our Muslim and Sinhala brethren in the Sinhala coastal areas . . . who have lost kith and kin and are in deep sorrow." A January 2 interview on the pro-LTTE website TamilNet with Bhanu, the LTTE Eastern military commander, carried unconfirmed reports of Sri Lanka Army soldiers who had been dragged into the sea by the tidal wave being saved by LTTE cadres, as well as uncharacteristic words of praise for Special Task Force (STF) aid to civilians and coordination with the LTTE.

3. (SBU) These initial calls for amity seem to be wearing thin, as more customary accusations and counter-allegations of malfeasance are beginning to surface more frequently in the local press. By the second week after the disaster, local English and Sinhala media were carrying largely unconfirmed stories of LTTE interference in relief efforts in the north and east, while the Tamil media were alleging Government mishandling/rerouting of relief supplies intended for Tamil communities in the north and east. Pro-LTTE sources have also claimed that the Marxist Sinhalese Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the Government's largest coalition partner, has commandeered supplies for Tamil communities and redirected them to Sinhalese communities in the south and Trincomalee. Representatives of Muslim communities in the east, on the other hand, have complained to emboffs of spotty and unreliable aid distribution in their constituencies. As usual, the truth behind these much-hyped stories is difficult to determine. In response, the Human Rights Commission has appointed a panel, headed by Ceylon Bank Director Lionel Fernando, to monitor distribution of relief in the north and east.

COORDINATION IN EAST SEEMS ALIVE AND WELL

4. (C) Despite the grousing in the media, contacts in the INGO and diplomatic community indicate that coordination between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the LTTE, at least in the east, is adequate, although some jockeying for authority/credit/responsibility still occurs. In Trincomalee (where the Sinhalese, Muslim and Tamil populations are roughly equal), for example, the pro-LTTE Tamil Rehabilitation Organization (TRO) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) participate side by side with the JVP in the

GSL-appointed district coordinating committee, which is headed by the Government Agent. According to USAID/OTI staff in the district, the coordinating committee appears to be working well, and assistance is reportedly flowing well, even into LTTE-controlled areas. (Indeed, since much of the LTTE-controlled area in Trincomalee lies along the coast, Tiger territory is reportedly getting a substantial amount of the aid available.) While there have been no significant complaints of GSL or LTTE malfeasance or obstructionism at the district level, there have been some reports of bottlenecks in distributing aid to individual communities--snafus that seem more likely attributed to systemic GSL inefficiencies and logistical constraints than to any intentional design to bypass particular groups. (Note: One exception appears to be the Sinhalese nationalist JVP. An aid worker in Trincomalee recounted stories of the JVP diverting aid intended for Tamil communities, which are concentrated along the coast, to Sinhalese Buddhist communities farther inland. End note.) The World Food Program representative reported attending a recent meeting in Batticaloa in which he observed the Government Agent and an LTTE representative working out the details of delivering and distributing aid in Tiger-controlled areas. Diplomatic colleagues in several European missions reported similar stories.

15. (C) In an effort to reduce pilferage and improve security, control of camps for people displaced by the tsunami was recently turned over to the Sri Lankan

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military--a move that routed the TRO from its secure position within camps in the east and ruffled LTTE feathers. The TRO, local government officials and other NGOs had been working together well in the camps, an INGO representative declared. Another source in the aid community reported that the LTTE had been carrying on active recruiting in the camps, which house a number of orphaned children who could be particularly vulnerable to such pressure. While the TRO has not been banned from the camps, Major General Sumit Balasuriya, the Sri Lanka Army General Officer Commanding in Trincomalee, has set new ground rules for TRO operation, e.g., the organization may not show pro-LTTE films, distribute propaganda or spend the night in the camps.

SOME COOPERATION AT CENTER;
SITUATION IN NORTH STILL HAZY

16. (C) The extent of destruction and the number of casualties in LTTE-controlled areas in the north remain difficult to assess. Accounts on the LTTE website likely underreport the degree of destruction and numbers of deaths among Tiger cadres. In the tsunami-affected northern districts of Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, where the LTTE wields complete control, the opportunities for interaction and coordination between the GSL and Tigers are minimal. Wallaya Pura, UNHCR Representative, a.i., said her organization has asked the Sri Lankan Air Force to allow an aircraft provided by a foreign donor to fly relief supplies into LTTE-controlled territory in the north. So far, Pura said, the GSL has not responded. (Note: The Director of Operations for the Air Force told DATT on January 12 that he was not aware of such a request. End note.) A positive reply would be a true litmus test of the GSL's much-reiterated willingness to cooperate, in Pura's view.

17. (C) The LTTE's monolithic authority, if nothing else, streamlines relief operations. According to UNDP Resident Representative Miguel Bermeo, LTTE-run relief efforts are more efficient than their GSL-run counterparts. However efficient these operations may be, that the LTTE has made overtures to the GSL to improve coordination at the central level, as President Chandrika Kumaratunga told the Ambassador in a January 6 conversation, suggests that the task of reconstruction is too great for the LTTE to handle alone. On January 12 Peace Secretariat head Jayantha Dhanapala told the Ambassador and DCM that the government began reaching out to the LTTE immediately after the disaster. Dhanapala said that he had participated in several working-level meetings with the LTTE on relief coordination, which he described as progressing well, on such subjects as rehabilitation of the coastal area.

18. (C) Amid much speculation in the local media that the LTTE would protest U.S. military participation in relief efforts, a Tamil-language radio broadcast on January 11 reported Tiger sources asserting that the LTTE has no objection to U.S. forces' presence in Sri Lanka for relief purposes. In an interview with AFP on January 11, Tiger political chief Thamilselvan expressed similar sentiments, stating that U.S. military participation is "understandable in a situation of human disaster." (These statements track closely with Reftel comments made by the LTTE Peace Secretariat head last week.) Local Sinhala media have also

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recently begun speculating that LTTE chief Prabhakaran might have been killed when the tidal wave hit Mullaitivu. (Note: Prabhakaran is habitually reclusive; his absence from the public scene over the past two weeks does not necessarily indicate death or injury. On the other hand, Sri Lankan military sources have told DATT that Prabhakaran was known to have been in Mullaitivu, which suffered extensive damage from the tsunami, on December 25. End note.)

ANNAN ASKED NOT TO GO NORTH?

9. (C) The January 7-8 visit of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan spurred a minor brouhaha after the GSL turned down a UN suggestion that he visit Tiger "headquarters" to review relief efforts in the north. President Kumaratunga indicated to the Ambassador on January 6 that the GSL, worried that the visit would give the Tigers legitimacy as a quasi-separate state, was working actively to discourage the request. Peace Secretariat head Dhanapala told the Ambassador and DCM on

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January 12 that a UNSYG visit to LTTE territory was a fundamental sovereignty issue on which the GSL would not waver. He was quite critical of UN efforts to make it happen. Publicly, however, the GSL has denied reports that it scotched the request, asserting instead that the UN decided on Annan's itinerary independently. UNDP's Bermeo told emboffs privately that he viewed the GSL's rejection as a "lost opportunity."

COMMENT

10. (C) The unprecedented magnitude of the natural catastrophe elicited unprecedented expressions of mutual good will and pledges of cooperation from the GSL and LTTE. Now that the initial shock is over, a sense of normalcy is slowly returning--and with it, unfortunately, the usual bickering, accusations and recriminations that characterize Sri Lankan political discourse. For the Tigers, accusing the GSL of mismanagement makes financial, as well as political, sense. The humanitarian disaster--and the (unproven) claim that the GSL is not providing for Tamils--will likely prove a better fundraising theme among the Tamil diaspora than the peace process, and the Tigers have every reason to continue harping on it. Behind the rhetoric, however, coordination appears largely to be working well at the local level. This--along with the LTTE/GSL quiet effort to improve communication at the central level--indicate that the Tigers may have been harder hit by the tsunami than they are willing to admit publicly. Before the disaster, the peace process had been stalled for so long and the parties had adopted such uncompromising positions that many observers were beginning to look for signs of rigor mortis. If nothing else, the tsunami, despite its dreadful human toll, could provide a

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face-saving pretext for a fresh start back to the peace table, but it will not happen anytime soon. The modest yet successful collaboration reported between the GSL and LTTE at the local level, if steadily continued, could offer a useful foothold from which to make the first step.

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